Domesticity is on an upswing. Again. The phenomenal success of British sexpot/media chef Nigella Lawson points to a series of paradoxes that seem particularly impossible for contemporary middle-class women to negotiate. Lawson, who avowedly loves to eat, presents her own body as an object of delectation—desirable even as it indulges in “forbidden” carbohydrates and sweets denied to less divinely corporeal women. Like her more matronly forerunner, Martha Stewart, Lawson purveys a “feeling”—or what Walter Benjamin would have described as the auratic effect—of domesticity. She markets the fumes rather than fundaments of a by-now fetishized art of household management, much the same sort of recondite and increasingly unfamiliar body of knowledge offered to the tyro by Cheryl Mendelson, author of the 1999 publishing sensation Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House. The rhetorical stress in Lawson’s paean to the art of “comfort cooking” is on a rejection of modernity (along with its avatar, “the overstretched modern woman”). Feminism brings middle-class (read professional, consumerist) women not liberation but an oppressive regime of “post”-living in every sense. The answer to the contradictions of twenty-first-century gender politics, it would seem, is to return to a time when feminism didn’t obtain, but to return via a carefully orchestrated—and admittedly illusionistic—sense of embodiment rather than action, being rather than doing.

We want to feel not like a postmodern, post feminist, overstretched modern woman, but rather, a domestic goddess, trailing nutmeggy fumes of baking pie in our languorous wake. So what I am talking about is not being a domestic goddess, exactly, but feeling like one.

—Nigella Lawson, How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking (2001)
One might observe, optimistically, that the marketing of home comforts today addresses a more diverse public than did the tomes of Sarah Stickney Ellis and Isabella Beeton. Celebrity chefs—both male and female—appeal to single, upwardly mobile consumers of both sexes, for instance, and—as the Stewart Omnimedia empire makes clear—a new aesthetics and indeed demographics of domesticity has exceeded the heteronormative assumption of such mid-twentieth-century housewifery guides as Redbook and Good Housekeeping. Yet it is my contention here that despite the apparent uncoupling of home and gender, or of home and marriage, it is still the unholy trinity of domesticity, maternity, and feminism that continues to bedevil our thinking about what it means to produce, as well as to maintain, an affect of domesticity—the complex of feeling we continue to associate with private life. It still takes a wife or mother (even if it is a man who chooses to fill the role) to make a home of the archetypal sort. The very fact that mothering remains such a huge source of conflict within feminism, as well as in the larger culture (Judith Warner, for example, has received a lot of press lately for her protest against the “perfect madness” of a middle-class “Mommy Mystique”), reinforces the ongoing ideological centrality of what philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio usefully refers to as “the impossibility of motherhood.”

What interests me about this moment is the fact that we have seen it before. The Victorian household economy, so frequently invoked by present-day ideologues as the prototype of authentic domesticity, was also a fragile construct, one equally oriented toward feeling (rather than actually behaving) like a domestic goddess. The term itself is an oxymoron (as Roseanne Barr surely recognized a few years ago when she tried to pitch a network series bearing the same title): true domestics are workers, members of a distinctly unglamorous service economy, and—as such—hardly goddess material. Domesticity encompasses both the pragmatic and the

1 DiQuinzio examines how “the resurgence of the woman’s movement in the second half of the twentieth century has intensified the contention surrounding mothering,” pointing out how “it is impossible to be a mother in the sense implied by motherhood, which suggests an essential identity or state of being.” “Essential motherhood” as such cannot be said to exist, in other words (vii).

2 In discussing the continuity between Victorian and contemporary conceptions of consumer domesticity, I want to bear in mind Jay Clayton’s suggestion that “cultural studies should not shy away from tracing long historical relationships between the past and present. In doing so, however, it must always attend equally to both the anomalous and the analogous. Continuity is a part of historical experience, but it exists side by side with zones of difference, areas of discontinuity and rupture” (36).

3 For a thorough discussion of how “the lifestyles of the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife’s traditional role—child care, home making, and sex—from poor countries to rich ones,” see Ehrenreich and Hochschild (40).
ideal, the state of being intimately known and located within a network of (largely involuntary) relations, as well as a concept of the most hallowed meanings one might wish to attach to such relations.

In this essay I would like to begin by invoking the example of one representative contemporary “social problem” novel, Allison Pearson’s 2002 best seller *I Don’t Know How She Does It* (“the definitive social comedy of working motherhood,” according to the *Washington Post*), before turning to the “domestic goddess” in an earlier incarnation: William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–8) with its highly equivocal treatment of domesticity, maternity, and heterosexual power relations. Pearson’s and Thackeray’s texts may be read as symptomatic of a frustrated desire for an elusive “bread-and-butter paradise” of domesticity (Thackeray 584) stimulated in both twenty-first and nineteenth-century writers by the face-off between liberal feminism—with its resort to a rhetoric of individualism and rights—and a continually regenerating “cult of true womanhood.”

It is around maternity, in particular, that both Pearson and Thackeray locate their critique of domesticity. After numerous mishaps, Pearson’s heroine, Kate Reddy, ends up renouncing her career as a hedge-fund manager in order more seriously to mother her two children, as well as to save her foundering marriage. Contrary to such a conclusion, much of the humor of the book arises from the protagonist’s failure to live up to her own internalized standards of domesticity (even as she resists and lampoons them). Although Pearson attempts to rectify the home/work imbalance formally (just as mid-Victorian social problem novelists attempted to overcome the contradictions of industrial capitalism via the marriage plot), her narrative is largely animated by Kate’s attempts to buy or simulate “domestic bliss,” rather than actually conjure it up “from scratch.” The novel opens in the middle of the night with the harried, jet-lagged narrator “distressing” store-bought mince pies as a ploy to convince stay-at-home mothers and teachers at her daughter’s school that they are her own: “Discarding the Sainsbury luxury packaging, I wrinkle the pies out of their pleated foil cups, place them on a chopping board and bring down a rolling pin on their blameless floury faces. This is not as easy as it sounds, believe me. . . .”

4 The ambivalent equation of domesticity with maternity in both texts runs counter, in an important sense, to Carolyn Dever’s recent claim that “the maternal ideal in fiction thus takes its shape and power in the context of almost complete maternal absence, and . . . through the necessary vehicle of such a void” (xi). Rather than investigate a poetics of maternal loss, I am interested here in examining an illusion—the “domestic goddess”—in relation to actual mothering practices in these narratives.

5 A recent manual, *Domestic Bliss: Simple Ways to Add Style to Your Life*, speaks to this same desire (see Konig).
is where the good mother is, baking for her children” (3). Meant to stand as a testament to maternal virtue, the “blameless” if provoking pies actually represent Kate’s striving after an unrealizable experience: being (rather than merely appearing as) a good mother. Her labor, concentrated on the unmaking of commercially produced comfort food, is paradoxical in that it is work dedicated to manufacturing a sign (rather than an artifact) of authentic maternity. Why not simply bake the pies themselves? Domesticity, the arrangements one can actually see in the temporal and spatial organization of a home, is made to stand in for the invisible work of nurturance associated with raising children. Any elision between the two leads to problems of representation, of course, for a well-kept house is no true indication of well-parented offspring. Thus the tension between seeming and being most reliably crops up in this confusion between homemaking and caregiving in both texts.

Pearson suggests that it is this sort of work which best typifies contemporary motherhood, blurring the boundaries between “good” and “bad” mothering by focusing on how a “feeling” of domesticity has become increasingly dislocated from traditional reproductive tasks. In order to feel like a “good” mother, Kate Reddy must persuade someone (other than herself) that her contribution to the school’s annual carol concert is authentic. The commodification of domesticity is experienced less as alienating than as necessary within a social domain that valorizes the “home-made,” even as it supports a market predicated upon the decline of domestic production. In Pearson’s novel, domestic authority is expressed largely through consumer taste and preference, a twenty-first-century version of what Ruskin praised as the Victorian woman’s power of “sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (77). Even if the novel finally rejects this way of life and subscribes to a fairly conservative account of maternity (as I believe it does), it nevertheless operates on the premise that the tension between seeming and being drives most women’s experience of mothering, regardless of their choices. Indeed, the current proliferation of advice literature designed to guide upper-middle-class women in their purchasing of affect bears out a widespread conflation of commerce and domesticity in contemporary Britain and America.

It may come as a shock, then, to realize that such confusion of commerce with domesticity is as persistent as Anglo-American notions of home itself. Judith Flanders writes in her compendious history, *Inside the Victorian Home*, that “the Victorian house became defined as a refuge, a place apart from the sordid rules of commercial life, with different morals, different rules, different guidelines to protect the soul from being consumed by commerce. Or so it seemed” (5). In fact, as both Warner
and Thad Logan have demonstrated, the moral dimension of Victorian domesticity was bound up from the outset with “the growth of a commodity culture and the development of consumer desire” (Logan 26). If, in the domestic sphere, women “were, in some sense, its inmates,” Logan points out, “they were also its producers, its curators, and its ornaments” (26). As producers, curators, and ornaments of the middle-class home, women were required to manage an empire of things, including their own persons, all the while effacing the materiality of its origins. When Nigella Lawson promises her reader the experience of “feeling” like a domestic goddess, she also promises to overcome an imprisoning prospect of stasis—surely the essence of “home”—in favor of performance and multiple subject positions: one might choose first to produce, and then to curate, one’s appearance as ornament. Nothing is fixed or constraining in such an account of domesticity. Also, one might argue, nothing is “real”: all that is solid melts in air.

Thackeray forcefully portrays the production and curation of domesticity as a morally legible process, albeit in a negative register: “[I]f you are not guilty have a care of appearances,” warns the narrator of Vanity Fair, “which are as ruinous as guilt” (445). He acknowledges the imperative to seem virtuous, even as he enforces as meaningful a distinction between mere reputation and actual conduct. Alternating between satire at the expense of cynical worldlings and sentimental celebration of those whom Becky Sharp derides as “children and child-lovers” (455), Thackeray’s narrator promotes a specific model of domestic virtue in the form of Amelia Sedley:

[V]ery likely the Heroic Female character which ladies admire is a more glorious and beautiful object than the kind, fresh, smiling, artless, tender little domestic goddess, whom men are inclined to worship—yet the latter and inferior sort of women must have this consolation—that the men do admire them after all:—and—that, in spite of all our kind friends’ warnings and protests, we go on in our desperate error and folly, and shall to the end of the chapter. . . . I am tempted to think that to be despised by her sex is a very great compliment to a woman. (115–16; emphasis added)

Amelia is identified, at least initially, as the heroine of Vanity Fair, and this is because, as the above passage makes clear, she is described, however ironically, as a genuine incarnation of the “domestic goddess.” Unlike the “Heroic Female,” she truly is a “glorious and beautiful object,” much admired by men, even as she is denigrated by women. Distinguished by a lack of worldliness, Amelia’s domesticity is rooted not in capable house-
hold management (or doing anything at all), but in obliviousness to anything beyond her strictly limited family circle. In this sense, we might say that Thackeray, like Lawson, is interested not so much in Amelia “being a domestic goddess,” as in “feeling like one.” Yet feeling for Thackeray denotes an outward orientation, unlike Lawson’s unabashedly autotelic one. A woman’s capacity for feeling—without hope of reciprocity—first for her husband, and then more importantly for her son, is what is at stake, not self-delighting, sensual enjoyment of home pleasures. In a novel dedicated to anatomizing the human condition as synonymous with avarice and ambition, “the bootless love of women for children in Vanity Fair” (497) marks maternal virtue as the sine qua non of domestic exceptionalism. By definition, Amelia’s love can never be compensated for or repaid; indeed, it is the one indispensable trait of domesticity that it must explicitly transcend market relations.

In contrast to Amelia’s self-sacrificing, apparently disinterested maternity, Becky Sharp would seem to stand for every kind of falseness of which human beings are capable. “Unsurpassable in lies” (524), Becky’s character is predicated upon a spectacular disregard for domestic virtue. She is exposed repeatedly, both by Thackeray’s narrator and his characters, as “a wicked woman—a heartless mother, a false wife” (549). Yet she, too, has the power to inspire worship. In the role of wife and mother, she fascinates Rawdon Crawley as well as their son with her mastery of appearances. She knows, in other words, how to make people “feel” for her:

Sometimes—one or twice a week—that lady visited the upper regions in which the child lived. She came like a vivified figure out of the *Magasin des Modes*—blandly smiling in the most beautiful clothes and little gloves and boots. . . . She nodded twice or thrice patronisingly at the little boy, who looked up from his dinner or from the pictures of soldiers he was painting. When she left the room, an odour of rose, or some other magical fragrance, lingered about the nursery. She was an unearthly being in his eyes, superior to his father—to all the world: to be worshipped and admired at a distance. . . . Oh thou poor lonely little benighted boy! Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children; and here was one who was worshipping a stone! (380)

Thackeray recognizes that Becky functions in *Vanity Fair* as another kind of domestic goddess, a foil to Amelia’s brand of divinity: “like a vivified figure out of the *Magasin des Modes, ”* she represents the perfectly self-curated ornament “worshipped and admired at a distance” not only by little boys, but also by most of the grown men she encounters and seduces.
for her own purposes. Yet this domestic ornament is furiously denounced by Thackeray’s narrator as nothing more than stone, not a feeling creature—something Amelia is to a fault—but rather a false idol, insentient, defined in terms of sensational surfaces rather than feeling depths. If Amelia’s domestic goddess is “kind, fresh, smiling, artless, tender,” and “little,” Becky’s is “unearthly,” “superior,” and “distant.”

Thackeray emphatically insists upon the difference between Amelia and Becky. Even so, the novel unwittingly dramatizes the difficulty of penetrating beneath the “odour of rose, or some other magical fragrance” that lingers about maternity to distinguish one domestic apparition from the other. In the case of each woman, a heady mixture of desire and wish fulfillment complicates not only the perspective of most characters, but of the narrator himself. Adult male desire is repeatedly figured as formed most powerfully within the mother-child dyad. The unrequited yearning of Major Dobbin for Amelia, for instance, is expressed principally in terms of childish appetite: “[A]nd so William was at liberty to look and long: as the poor boy at school who has no money may sigh after the contents of the tart-woman’s tray” (597). Amelia is represented both in terms of the tantalizing “contents” of the tray and the prohibitive “tart-woman” herself, someone who must be paid before a “poor boy’s” desired object may be attained. Too much feeling, it would seem, leads to such rhetorical doublings throughout *Vanity Fair*. With both Becky and Amelia, domestic power is ultimately organized around unstable congeries of affect, whether produced from within the woman or without.

Despite his efforts to play them off one another, Thackeray ultimately acknowledges that the economics of any “little domestic establishment” (544) in a “ready-money society” (204) is predicated on such dissonance between appearance and reality:

*The best of women (I have heard my grandmother say) are hypocrites. We don’t know how much they hide from us: how watchful they are when they seem most artless and confidential: how often those frank smiles which they wear so easily, are traps to cajole or elude or disarm—I don’t mean your mere coquettes, but your domestic models, and paragons of virtue. . . . We accept this amiable slavishness, and praise a woman for it: we call this pretty treachery truth. A good housewife is of necessity a humbug.* (175)

If even “your domestic models” and “paragons of virtue” dissimulate in order “to cajole or elude or disarm” the ones they love, as the narrator (and his grandmother!) suggest, all members of society are complicit in “this amiable slavishness.” And to assert, as Thackeray’s narrator does,
that “a good housewife is of necessity a humbug” is to undermine carefully constructed antinomies within the text: good versus bad mother, domestic goddess versus stone idol.

In Becky Sharp, the consummate professional whose art consists endlessly in inventing “a character for herself” (641), Thackeray explores motherhood as performance with almost clinical detachment. Relentlessly exposed in her lack of maternal affection, Becky is described as utterly indifferent to little Rawdon’s physical and emotional needs. As he grows more critical of his mother, her behavior toward him also becomes more hostile: “[T]he consciousness that the child was in the house was a reproach and a pain to her” (444). She notices him chiefly in the presence of others with whom “tenderness [is] the fashion” (451). Eventually losing custody of her son, Becky maintains an interest in Rawdon insofar as he features in narratives retailed for personal gain to would-be sympathizers, “bursting into tears about her boy, and exhibiting the most frantic grief when his name was mentioned, or she saw anybody like him” (641–42). Becky’s performance of motherly grief is powerful enough to win over supporters to her cause; only when her nemesis Wenham disabuses a believing Mrs. Alderney is the truth of her maternal ignominy published abroad. Reunited with Amelia after years of vagabondage, Becky finds common ground in their shared experience of motherhood as loss. Becky has given up her son; so has Amelia. Becky’s family has disintegrated; so has Amelia’s. Both women are unable to maintain their own desires within the prevailing system of domestic values. Economic constraints govern their choices; both women give up a child (whether willingly or not) in response to pressures codified as duty. When each faces the other, childless, she sees reflected a version of herself and the act whereby her motherhood negates itself as an active practice, becoming purely discursive or symbolic: “The child, my child? Oh yes, my agonies were frightful,’ Becky owned, not perhaps without a twinge of conscience. It jarred upon her, to be obliged to commence instantly to tell lies in reply to so much confidence and simplicity” (660).

Pairing female protagonists, Thackeray foregrounds the narcissistic investment of the women who represent both “good” and “bad” mothers in Vanity Fair, examining what may well be “selfish” extremes of parental devotion on the one hand and negligence on the other. Neither position is naturalized for Thackeray; both are understood as excessive, perhaps even pathological. If Becky’s relations with her child are cold and abusive, Amelia’s attachment to her infant clearly borders on fanatical:

How his mother nursed him, and dressed him, and lived upon him; how she drove away all nurses, and would scarce allow any hand but her own
to touch him . . . need not be told here. This child was her being. Her existence was a maternal caress. She enveloped the feeble and unconscious creature with love and worship. It was her life which the baby drank in from her bosom. Of nights, and when alone, she had stealthy and intense raptures of motherly love, such as God’s marvellous care has awarded to the female instinct—joys how far higher and lower than reason—blind beautiful devotions which only women’s hearts know. (358, 360)

While Becky’s sense of self eclipses that of her offspring, Amelia can be said to exist only insofar as “the child [is] her being.” Exalted for her “blind beautiful devotions,” she is also shown to be ruled by “female instinct,” a faculty described as both “higher and lower than reason” (360). When alone, and given over to the “stealthy and intense raptures of motherly love,” Amelia’s hyperbolic maternity produces an answering hysterical excess in Thackeray’s prose. In this sense, Amelia stands in every bit as troubling a relation to emergent nineteenth-century ideals of impersonal motherhood as does Becky. The domestic goddess excites a surfeit of feeling—too much rapture—either in the mother herself (enveloping as she does an unresponsive, “feeble and unconscious creature”) or in her beholders (little Rawdon, Dobbin, and—at times—the narrator). If, as Amanda Anderson has suggested, objective or “professional” conceptions of maternity at midcentury held out the prospect of “far-reaching forms of guardianship and influence, which in turn depended on cultivated practices of moral discernment, impersonal judgment, and even self-crafting” (35), Thackeray’s domestic goddesses are strongly allied with what Anderson terms an oppositional “non-reflective femininity” (46). Both Becky and Amelia feel ill at ease in their maternal skin: it is a role that invites excesses both of autonomy and self-sacrifice that are hard to reconcile with forms of “guardianship and influence” ideally attributed to Victorian motherhood.

Thackeray’s awareness of the performative dimensions of femininity for both Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley mobilizes two dominant narratorial modes in Vanity Fair: satire and sentiment. Defined as a privileging of feeling over reason, sentiment asserts itself sporadically throughout the novel in passages such as the narrator’s hymn to mother and child quoted above. Satire rules the rest. Thackeray’s customary mode is satirical; writing to Robert Bell about the reception of Vanity Fair, he vows: “I want to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story—we ought all to be with our own and other stories. Good God don’t I see (in that may-be cracked and warped looking-glass in which I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts follies short-comings?” (qtd. in Shillingsburg 762). According to his own conception of the novel, Thackeray believed that “pathos . . . should be very occasional indeed in
humorous works and indicated rather than expressed or expressed very rarely” (762). Yet, for Thackeray, both pathos and humor, or sentiment and satire, aim to influence the reader in a register far from rational. “If you detect the ridicule, and your kindliness is chilled by it, you are slipping into the grasp of Satire. . . .” George Meredith hypothesized in 1897, “the Satirist is a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile” (73, 76). As a novelistic “moral agent” and “scavenger,” Thackeray deliberately affronts his public with bilious misanthropy: “we must lift up our voices about these and howl to a congregation of fools” (762).

Satire and sentiment continue to shape readerly desires for a domesticity of affect, rather than essence, I would argue, in response to threats consistently associated with the politics of liberal feminism. As textual strategies designed to manipulate feeling, rather than to address reason, satire and sentiment are still the preferred rhetorical tools of writers seeking to enshrine, as well as to debunk, a renaissant myth of the domestic goddess in contemporary culture (see de Marneffe; Warner). Becky Sharp anticipates Nigella Lawson’s blithe uncoupling of being and seeming by offering a much earlier, and ultimately more radical, account of the origins of virtual domesticity:

“I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year. I could dawdle about in the nursery, and count the apricots on the wall. I could water plants in a green-house, and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatisms, and order half-a-crown’s worth of soup for the poor. I shouldn’t miss it much, out of five thousand a year.” . . . And who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations—and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made a difference between her and an honest woman? (422)

Thackeray’s narrator places himself in the bizarre position of critiquing, and yet grudgingly affirming Becky’s opportunistic theory of domestic virtue as performance. An honest woman can be made, a domestic goddess can be had—all for the right price.

Meredith sees the English as particularly prone to vacillating between satire and sentiment, both terms he opposes to his own preferred notion of the Comic spirit: “Generally, however, the English elect excel in satire, and they are noble humorists. The national disposition is for hard-hitting, with a moral purpose to sanction it; or for a rosy, sometimes a larmoyant, geniality, not unmanly in its verging upon tenderness, and with a singular attraction for thick-headedness, to decorate it with asses’ ears and the most beautiful sylvan haloes” (72).
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